

The Notebooks of Joseph D. Stiles

John Benedict Buescher



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The Notebooks of Joseph D. Stiles

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A manuscript of allegedly automatic writing, consisting of six notebooks. These are the first version of a series of “letters,” written between 1854 and 1857, which would be edited by Allen Putnam and published in 1859 by the Boston firm of Bela Marsh as *Twelve Messages from the Spirit John Quincy Adams, through Joseph D. Stiles, Medium, to Josiah Brigham*.¹ The edited and published version contained a preface by Josiah Brigham, as well as a “reviser’s preface” by editor Allen Putnam, which explained how the manuscript was written and edited for publication.

The notebooks are held in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.²

Joseph D. Stiles

The writer of these notebooks was Joseph D. Stiles, who was born December 10, 1828 in Waltham, Massachusetts, one of several children of Joseph and Lucy Stiles.³ The family, early in Joseph Jr.’s life, moved to Weymouth. Joseph Jr. was a lifelong bachelor and died at what had been his mother’s home in Weymouth, on March 31, 1897.

In 1884, he provided a short autobiographical account of his development as a spiritualist medium to Lewis L. Whitlock, publisher of the Boston spiritualist journal *Facts*.⁴ In the section, “How I Became a Medium,” he says:

In 1850, two years subsequent to the startling manifestations at Rochester, my sister, Harriet, who was visiting friends and relations in Weymouth,

¹ A scan of the New York Public Library’s copy of the published book is at http://ssoc.selfip.com:81/1859__stiles__twelve_messages_from_john_quincy_adams.pdf; a scan of the Library of Congress’ own copy of the printed text is at <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t2v41zw5h>

² In boxes catalogued in “R. Evans, papers.”

³ Joseph, Jr. had four full sisters, and several half-siblings by his father’s first wife.

⁴ “Platform Tests at Onset Bay Camp-Meeting, with Autobiographical Sketch of the Medium, Joseph D. Stiles, of Weymouth, Mass.,” *Facts* (Boston), (March 1884): 43-49.

discovered herself to be what was then known as a table-tipping medium. My father and his family then resided in North Brigham, Mass. Messages and tests of an interesting and convincing nature were "tipped out," awakening in each member of the family a great interest, and proving to us that the "gates were ajar." Friends and neighbors flocked to the house to find out for themselves whether these things were so, many of whom, from the evidence thus given, were convinced of their reality, and lived and died in the soul-comforting belief. Other members of the family in turn became mediums, and many and striking were the demonstrations given through their medial powers. It was not until 1853 that I discovered the same elements and powers existing within myself. I was then in the printing office of Basin & Chandler, on the corner of Cornhill and Brattle Streets. At the case one day I found myself unable to compose the type into the stick, and, after repeated trials, came to the conclusion that my mission as a printer had come to an end. Still I persevered only to be discomfited. I left the office the next day, never again to enter it in the capacity of a printer. I attended several circles in Boston to develop and strengthen the power which had so mysteriously, and so much against my will and desire at that time, taken possession of me. Tipping tables, physical, mental, and other phenomena followed in rapid succession, until it was announced to me that I must go before, and present to, the public the remarkable manifestations which were gaining such a firm foothold in my organization.

Stiles had learned the printing trade by apprenticing in the Universalist newspaper, *The Christian Freeman and Family Visiter*, under the tutelage of Universalist minister Sylvanus Cobb.⁵ In another article about Stiles, Whitlock tells more about Stiles' early work as a printer, and why he had to quit:

He was educated as a printer, and held a responsible position as proof-reader and critic in some government work, we have heard, which vocation he followed till spirits made it impossible.⁶

Josiah Brigham, to whom the messages in the manuscript were addressed, described Stiles this way:

Mr. Stiles is a respectable, unassuming young man, of only common-school education, with no pretensions to more than common capabilities. He is a printer by trade, and worked at that business until he perceived he possessed

⁵ Obituary for Stiles, *New York Sun*, April 1, 1897.

⁶ L. L. Whitlock, "Mr. Joseph D. Stiles," *Facts* (Boston), (July 1886): 191-192.

mediumistic powers. His organization is such that he is very susceptible to spirit-influence, and is one of the best writing-mediums in the country.⁷



JOSEPH D. STILES.

Facts (Boston), July 1886

Stiles had almost certainly been raised a Universalist, in Weymouth. In 1842, when Stiles was thirteen years old, John Quincy Adams—after his Presidency, he served in the House of Representatives—visited his constituents there. They wished to honor him for his anti-slavery efforts in Congress, and was received in a grand procession that made its way from the Universalist Church to the Unitarian one,

⁷ *Twelve Messages from the Spirit John Quincy Adams*, preface, iv.

where he gave a long speech, outlining his efforts to stem the machinations of legislators and of the current President, John Tyler, to extend and solidify slavery in the nation. Adams was “aged” but “iron of limb” and had “thin hairs of silver grey,” as the welcoming delegation put it, but was lionized by the assembled throng as a heroic warrior for liberty. He would have written out and read his speech from a copy he had penned himself, in the tremulous handwriting that characterized his later years.

The pastor of the Universalist Church in Weymouth at that time was John Murray Spear, who served on the committee of arrangements for the visit.⁸ Years later, after he had been ushered out of his Weymouth pulpit by a less-than-politically-radical contingent within his congregation, Spear became a devoted and well-known spiritualist, who, in 1852, at the beginning of a long and sensational career as a spirit medium, delivered, and had published, a series of messages from the spirit of Universalist clergyman John Murray, entitled *Messages from the Superior State*. It is not surprising that when Joseph Stiles visited his kin in Weymouth in 1850 that he found them all deeply engaged in trying to turn themselves into spirit mediums. Nor is it surprising that, when Stiles began acting as the instrument of the spirit of John Quincy Adams for Josiah Brigham, that the spirits of Adams and of Brigham’s and Adams’ previous minister Peter Whitney would both have converted in the afterlife to a firm conviction of the truth of spiritualism and of universal salvation.

Josiah Brigham

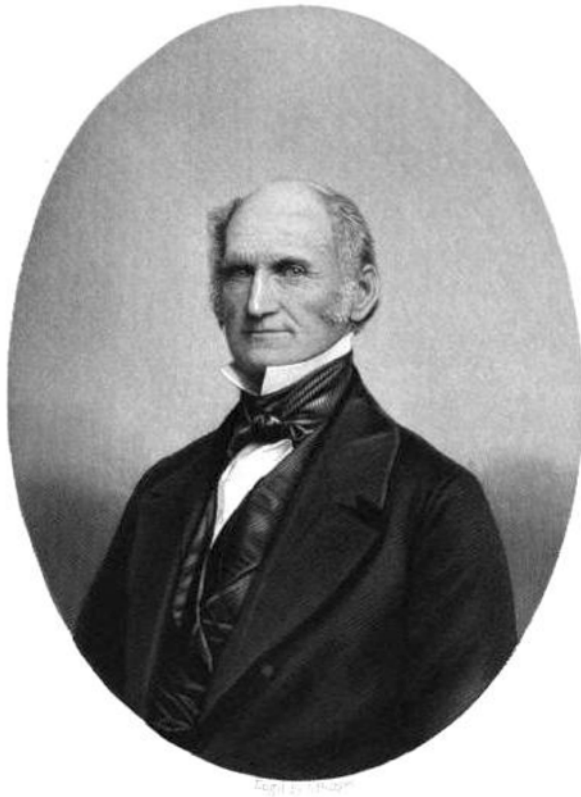
At the time these notebooks were written, Brigham (1788-1867) was one of the richest and most reputable citizens of Quincy, Massachusetts.⁹ He had been the commander of the Quincy Light Infantry during the War of 1812, shortly after which, he had married Elizabeth Fiske, by whom he had two daughters, Abigail and Elizabeth.

He owned a large general store and was a well-known public figure, serving on the city’s school committee and involving himself in other municipal affairs. He sat

⁸ *Address of John Quincy Adams, to His Constituents of the Twelfth Congressional Districts at Braintree, September 17th, 1842* (Boston: J. H. Eastburn, 1842), 2.

⁹ “Josiah Brigham, Esq.,” in John Livingston, ed., *Monthly Biographical Magazine: Containing Portraits and Memoirs of Distinguished Americans Now Living* 1.1 (December 1852): 66-69.

on the board of directors of the Quincy Mutual Fire Insurance Company and was also president of two banks—the Quincy Stone Bank and the Quincy Savings Bank.



Josiah Brigham

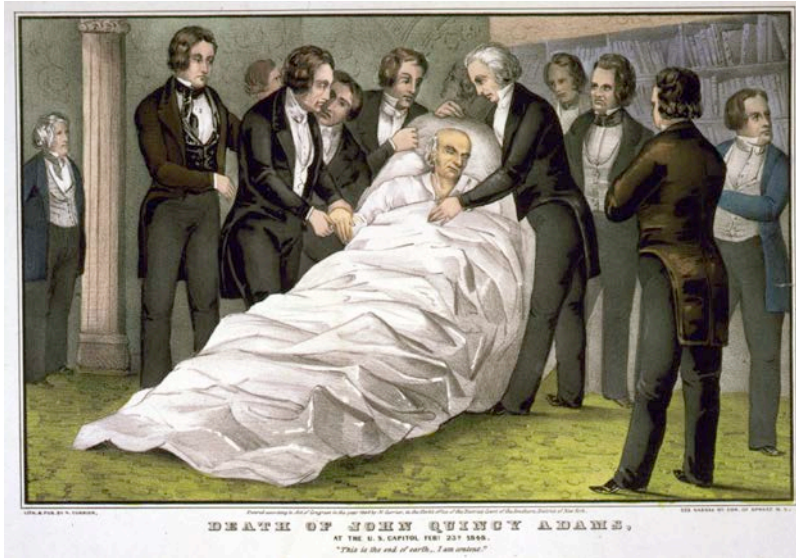
Brigham was an important figure in the Whig Party and had been a devoted supporter of John Quincy Adams, who was also a native of Quincy and a longtime resident of the city.¹⁰ They were both members the First Congregational Church of Quincy (which had become Unitarian in 1750) when it was pastored, until 1843, by the Reverend Peter Whitney, and thereafter by the Reverend William Parsons Lunt. Brigham undoubtedly had been present at Adams' interment in Quincy in March 1848, and had heard Lunt's discourse on the occasion.¹¹ At that time, Brigham was the parish clerk and signed off on the reconstruction of part of the church to include room for the tombs of John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and their wives. He had also

been afterwards instrumental in having Lunt's 1850 lecture on the "union of the human race"—a topic of which John Quincy Adams had been fond—printed up as a

¹⁰ See the October 19, 1840 letter, for example, from John Quincy Adams to the group, including Josiah Brigham, that encouraged Adams to run for the House of Representatives, reprinted in the Whig newspaper, *The Newark Daily Advertiser*, October 30, 1840.

¹¹ William P. Lunt, *A Discourse Delivered in Quincy, March 11, 1848, at the Interment of the Sixth President of the United States* (Boston: C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1848). In fact, Brigham was on the committee that arranged the interment ceremony. Adams had died at the U.S. Capitol in Washington on February 23.

pamphlet and disseminated.¹² Peter Whitney had died in 1843 and was interred in the church's graveyard, near where Adams would be buried. William Parsons Lunt died in 1857 while on a tour to the Holy Land and was buried in the desert near Akaba.¹³ Josiah Brigham died in 1867 and would be buried in the Quincy Parish Church's graveyard.¹⁴



In his preface to *Twelve Messages from the Spirit John Quincy Adams*, Brigham wrote that he met Joseph Stiles in June of 1854, when the medium was invited to his house, perhaps by Brigham's wife or his married daughter Elizabeth Baxter to conduct an

evening séance. Both his wife and daughter, Brigham said, were interested in spiritualism, and both eventually became mediums themselves. At that time, Stiles' hand was moved to write the signature of Josiah Brigham's deceased brother Winslow and to deliver a greeting, via "automatic writing," to Josiah from the spirit of his brother.

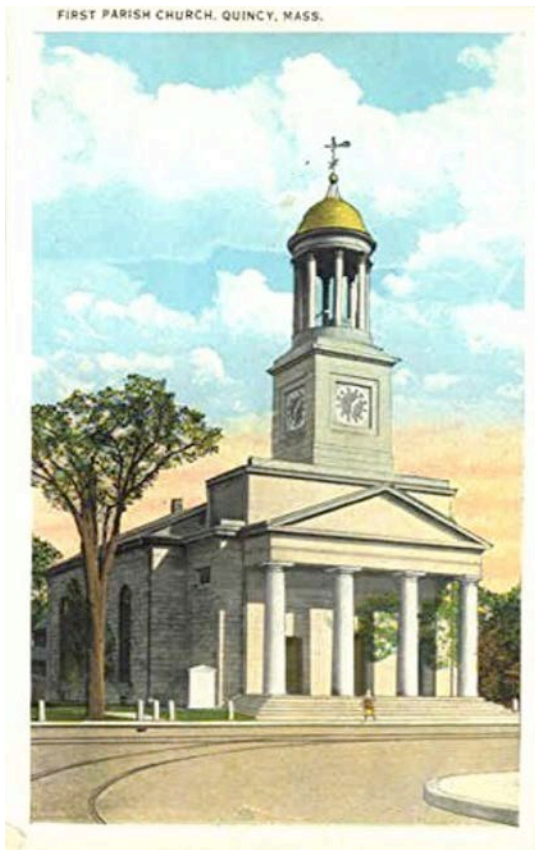
At another séance shortly thereafter in July, Stiles' hand was moved to write another message to Josiah from a spirit. This message was signed "John Quincy Adams" in the "peculiar, tremulous" penmanship that had marked Adams' handwriting in his old age and with which Brigham was familiar from his

¹² William P. Lunt, *The Union of the Human Race. A Lecture Delivered before the Quincy Lyceum, in Quincy, Mass., February 7, 1850* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850), dedicatory letter listing Brigham.

¹³ Frederic A. Whitney, *An Historical Sketch of the Old Church, Quincy, Mass.* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1864), 16; Chandler Robbins, *A Discourse in Commemoration of William Parsons Lunt, D.D., delivered at Quincy, Mass., on Sunday, June 7, 1857, by Chandler Robbins* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1857).

¹⁴ "Death of a Well-Known Citizen," *Boston Post*, July 29, 1867. Brigham had been an active member of the Rural Lodge of F. and A. Masons for more than fifty years. His wife had passed away the year before.

correspondence with Adams. Stiles claimed that he had never seen Adams' wobbly signature and even denied that he knew that "there was any such in being." Nor, he said, had he ever read anything that Adams had written.¹⁵



The first "letter" in these notebooks to Brigham from the spirit of John Quincy Adams is dated July 9, 1854. Two Sundays before this, Brigham's pastor, William Lunt, had preached a sermon at the First Parish Church entitled, "Trial of the Spirits."¹⁶ That is, on the passage from the first letter of St. John, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out in the world." It was straight-ahead preaching against spiritualism and mediums, even so far as to dwell on St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, "Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Pastor Lunt noted:

It seems to be assumed by many at the present day, that because a communication is made by *spirits*, (granting the fact that it is so communicated,) it is, for that reason alone, without looking at the character of it, or scrutinizing it by the tests of reason and the highest consciousness of the soul, to be received and confided in. We are bound to no such deference.¹⁷

Lunt mentioned no such activity among his parishioners, but it is virtually certain that some of them were already interpreting the phrase, "Try the spirits," as

¹⁵ The Massachusetts Historical Society has examples of letters from John Quincy Adams to Josiah Brigham (as head of the Quincy school committee and as one of the petitioners to Adams, asking him to consider running for Congress). It seems likely that in 1854 Brigham could have had letters from Adams at his home.

¹⁶ William P. Lunt, *Trial of the Spirits: a discourse delivered in the First Congregational Church, Quincy, Massachusetts, June 25, 1854* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1854).

¹⁷ Lunt, 12.

an invitation rather than a cautionary warning. Brigham had been a member of groups of supporters—undoubtedly financial—within the congregation who had made the printing of a few of Pastor Lunt’s sermons possible. But when this sermon was published on the request of some of his congregation, Brigham’s name was not listed among the publishing committee.

Stiles Writes the Notebooks

From that time, Stiles began producing “messages” from the spirit of John Quincy Adams, which the medium wrote “automatically” in notebooks, in installments. These, collected together, are the documents brought together here, and they constituted the first draft of the manuscript that was published in 1859 as *Twelve Messages from the Spirit John Quincy Adams*.¹⁸ Brigham explained how Stiles produced them:

The messages contained in this book, coming from the immortal spirit of John Quincy Adams, were written out in manuscripts, at various times, at my house in Quincy, Mass., and at the house of my son-in-law, C[harles] F[rancis] Baxter, Boston, during the last four years, through the hand of Joseph D. Stiles, medium, when in an entranced state, and who, at the time of writing them, was unconscious of what was being written. The whole was written in an almost perfect *fac-simile* of that peculiar, tremulous handwriting of Mr. Adams in the last years of his earthly life,—a handwriting which probably no man living could, in his natural state of mind, so perfectly imitate, and which is wholly unlike the usual handwriting of the medium. The writing of these messages in manuscript was commenced in August, 1854, and closed in March, 1857. The medium (in trance) commenced copying and revising them for publication about the first of April following, and finished in June, 1858, making some additions and some omissions.

When influenced to write, he would usually be controlled from one to three hours at a sitting, and write generally from one and a half to three pages in a day when he did write. He was quite irregular as to the time of writing. Sometimes he would be absent for several days; sometimes a week; sometimes three or four weeks.

¹⁸ Even the publisher, from the beginning (at least, judging by its ad copy), does not seem to have consistently remembered whether the title was “... *the Spirit John Quincy Adams*” or “... *the Spirit of John Quincy Adams*.”

During the time these messages were in progress the medium was doing a good deal of other writing, and was accustomed to hold private circles frequently at my house and at the houses of other friends in Quincy, and also in Boston, Waltham, Hingham and other neighboring towns; and, in consequence of these various engagements, the completion of the work has been delayed.¹⁹

During the course of the deliverance of these messages purporting to be from the spirit of Adams, Josiah Brigham became a convinced spiritualist. And as that conviction became more certain, the spirit of Adams directed Brigham to have the messages published. Brigham would describe his own motive for doing so:

... it is not with the expectation of receiving pecuniary reward, but in the hope and belief that it will do much good in the world; that the teachings, principles and revelations therein contained, which are in harmony with those of pure Christianity, are calculated to elevate, improve and benefit the human race.²⁰

But first, Stiles rewrote and revised the original manuscript, purportedly still entranced and under the control of the spirit of Adams. This produced a second version, intermediate between the notebooks manuscript and the publisher's. That second version, as far as is known, no longer exists. It would be interesting to compare the first and second versions, produced before it went to an editor, to get an idea of what the spirit of John Quincy Adams thought needed to be clarified and changed. "The first draft," it was said, "is nearly all in the apparent handwriting of a tremulous old man. The second draft contains nearly an hundred pages in the style of the old man, though here it is more regular and firm than in the first."²¹ But the second draft also was filled out with nearly four hundred pages written in Stiles' own "neat and elegant" handwriting. All in all, no matter how "automatically" it was written, Stiles must have felt that producing it over the course of those months took a tremendous amount of work.

Brigham wrote that, "After the work was revised and copied by the medium, but before it was carried to the printer, I was desired to place it in the hands of Mr. Allen Putnam, of Roxbury, to review." He brought the first version as well as the second, revised version to Putnam. Brigham would later keep some version of the manuscript at his home, ready to display to anyone who was curious to see it.

¹⁹ *Twelve Messages*, preface, iii-iv.

²⁰ *Twelve Messages*, preface, x.

²¹ *Twelve Messages*, reviser's preface, xii.

Allen Putnam

Allen Putnam was born in Danvers, Massachusetts in 1802, and had graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1825. One of his colleagues there would much later write a précis of Putnam's career:

Mr. Putnam was a proctor while in the Divinity School. He probably was a teacher for two years after leaving college, and commenced preaching in 1830. He was settled as minister of the Unitarian Church in Augusta, Me. After nine or ten years he resigned his charge, and, I think, then ceased to preach. I lost knowledge of him for many years; and, when I renewed my acquaintance with him, he was in the wood and coal business in Roxbury. Of late he has been a hierophant among the (so-called) spiritualists, a frequent speaker at their meetings, the author of a commentary on the Gospels in accordance with their theories, and, if not the author, the editor, of very numerous letters, purporting to be communications from distinguished men, no longer living in this world, containing self-accusations for their willing blindness, or for conduct opposed to their unwilling convictions, with reference to divers manifestations of necromancy. While I am not disposed to receive these documents as authentic, and yet am unable to solve the curious problem in psychology which they present, I still believe Mr. Putnam to have been an honest man, self-deluded, and free from all conscious wrong in his assaults on the fair fame of the dead and the credulity of the living.²²

By 1858, when Brigham approached him with the Stiles manuscripts, Putnam was already a widely known advocate for spiritualism and had written and published much on the subject, including a book about his own experiences with spirit mediums.²³ In the "Reviser's Preface" of *Twelve Messages*, Putnam wrote:

²² Andrew Preston Peabody, *Harvard Reminiscences* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888), 145-146. Putnam died in 1887.

²³ *Spirit Works, Real but Not Miraculous* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1853) [Putnam's lecture of 21 Sept 1853, read at City Hall, Roxbury]; *Natty, a Spirit: His Portrait and His Life* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1856); and *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Witchcraft and Miracle* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1858). In later years he would be a frequent, paid contributor to the Boston-published spiritualist newspaper, *The Banner of Light*, and would publish or contribute to many books, including *Bible Marvel Workers, and the Power Which Helped or Made Them Perform Mighty Works, and Utter Inspired Words: together with some personal traits and characteristics of prophets, apostles, and Jesus; or new readings of "the miracles"* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1873); *Biography of Mrs. J.*

The manuscript was brought to me, in July, 1858, by Mr. Josiah Brigham, of Quincy, an elderly and highly respected citizen of that town. He informed me that he had come, at the request of Mr. Adams, to ask me to read the manuscript; after that, to advise in reference to its publication; and, in the event of publication, to look over the copy and the proofs.²⁴

Putnam read the manuscript and was enthusiastic. He took over the task of editing it and preparing it for publication by his own publisher, the Boston firm of Bela Marsh. In his "Reviser's Preface" to *Twelve Messages*, Putnam writes to convince the reader that what was in the final published book was really touched only lightly by his editorial hand, and that whatever changes he made were ones of arrangement and ordering of the parts of the (revised, version two) manuscript:

Only a few corrections have been made, and those were called for more because of inadvertence than of defective knowledge or skill on the part of the writer. The corrections made by *me* are done in *red pencil*, so that whoever may see the manuscript can tell precisely how many and what changes have been made. The sequence of some of the topics has been varied by me, and, in arranging for that, I was obliged to copy several pages of the manuscript, which have gone to the printer in my own handwriting. Also I have increased the subdivisions, furnished all the titles to the messages, and inserted the contents at the heads of the sections. But the facts, sentiments and opinions of the writer, as also the dress, substantially, in which he clothed them, have studiously been left unaltered, whether I give credence and approbation to them or not. Even had I felt myself at liberty to make essential changes, the time was not at my command to rewrite and to bring the sentences and figures into harmony with my own taste. The reader has the work almost literally such as it was when first brought to me. ... Mr. Adams, through Mrs. [Louisa] Parmelee, of Boston (Mr.

H. Conant, the world's medium of the nineteenth century ... [by John W. Day and Theodore Parker (Spirit)] ... opening remarks by Allen Putnam (Boston: William White and Company, Banner of Light Office, 14 Hanover Street, 1873); *Twenty Years on the Wing: Brief Narrative of My Travels and Labors as a Medium Sent Forth and Sustained by the Association of Beneficents in Spirit Land. By John Murray Spear.* Preface by Allen Putnam (Boston: William White and Company, 1873); *Agassiz and Spiritualism* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1874); *New England Witchcraft Explained by Modern Spiritualism* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1881); and *Post-Mortem Confessions: being letters written through a mortal's hand by spirits who, when in mortal, were officers of Harvard college: with comments* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1886).

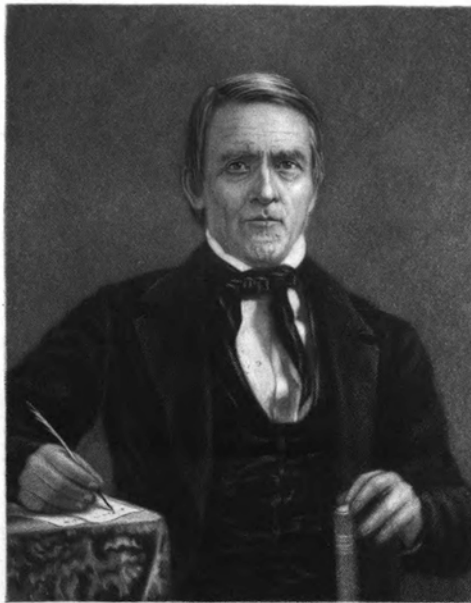
²⁴ *Twelve Messages*, reviser's preface, xi.

Stiles and myself are strangers to each other), tells me that much of the poetry was furnished by other spirits, who came to his relief and the medium's, and who attempted little more than to versify, in an off-hand way, what had just been given in prose.²⁵ My proposition to suppress a large part of the poetry he declined giving his assent to, and he preferred to have it stand as it does, rather than be brought together as an appendix. He has been gratified. ...

Did John Quincy Adams furnish the account here published? He did. Those who need the proof are referred to the book itself as containing strong internal evidences, while the prefaces furnish a few of the external.

The work might be described as his own account of *his own triumphal reception into the Spirit World*. We have here *a spirit's autobiography*, covering a very bright but interesting portion of his life above.²⁶

Precursors of the Book



*Yours truly
C. Hammond*

The notebooks and the published book are in line with a series of previous books of automatic writing, written and published beginning in 1851, in which mediums, purportedly unconscious or in trance, came under the control of the spirits of famous personages, many of them Founding Fathers or more distant patriots or historical notables. In these writings, the spirits tell of their postmortem progress, especially detailing their spiritual evolution and enlightenment regarding the truth of spiritualism itself, as well as the reformist causes current among “advanced” thinkers of the 1850s. The deceased notables, typically, would have progressed through the heavenly geography of seven spheres,

²⁵ Louisa Parmelee advertised at the time as an “Eclectic and Clairvoyant Physician,” with an office on Washington Street in Boston.

²⁶ *Twelve Messages*, reviser's preface, xiii-xiv and xvi. The poetry in the book would also be singled out for obloquy by non-spiritualist reviewers in the mainstream newspapers; see the review of the book in the *Washington Evening Star*, January 21, 1860.

first described in a rudimentary way by Andrew Jackson Davis in his 1847 book, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (which had also been dictated while in trance). Many of these writings had as an implicit theme the spiritual uplift of human life through progressive reform, and the universal brotherhood of mankind.

Books in this genre that preceded Stiles' work included:

Charles Hammond, *Light from the Spirit World: comprising a series of articles on the condition of spirits, and the development of mind in the rudimental and second spheres*. Rochester: W. Heughes, 1852.

Charles Hammond, *Light from the Spirit World: the pilgrimage of Thomas Paine and others to the seventh circle in the spirit world*. Rochester: D. M. Dewey; New York: Fowler and Wells, 1852.

Isaac Post, *Voices from the Spirit World; being communications from many spirits, by the hand of Isaac Post, medium*. Rochester: Charles H. McDonnell, 1852.

John Murray Spear, ed. by Simon Crosby Hewitt, *Messages from the Superior State Communicated by John Murray, through John M. Spear, in the Summer of 1852, containing important instruction to the inhabitants of the Earth*. Boston: Bela Marsh, 1853.

Horace G. Wood, *The Philosophy of Creation: Unfolding the Laws of the Progressive Development of Nature and Embracing the Philosophy of Man, Spirit, and the Spirit World, by Thomas Paine, through the hand of Horace G. Wood, Medium*. Boston: Bela Marsh, 1854.

Asaph Bemis Child, *The Progressive Life of Spirits after Death*. Boston: Bela Marsh, 1855.

The genre would live for some years after the Stiles book was published, as well, convincing spiritualists that, for example, Thomas Paine had renounced his atheism and materialism, that George Washington had, in the afterlife, come to regret his slave-holding, that Benjamin Franklin had discovered a raft of new inventions that he would deliver to Earth, that Theodore Parker had continued to advance along with the intelligentsia of New England into various reform movements, and that

certain newspaper editors and scientists who had been antagonists of spiritualism had repented in the afterlife.²⁷

There are quite a few published examples of this mid-19th-century automatic writing, but, apart from the Stiles notebooks, none of the original handwritten manuscripts appear to have survived. This fact alone makes the Stiles notebooks important. The raft of books published around that time that were claimed to have been written by mediums entirely unconscious of what their pen hands were writing attracted attention because of their unearthly mode of production. They gained an aura of wonder and commanded the respect of people as being in truth produced by disembodied spirits because they were presented as having bled directly from the mediums' pens without any intervention on their part. If the mediums did not produce them, therefore, the argument was that the spirits must have done so.

The impression that the readers of these books were supposed to have was that what they were reading was a reproduction, set in type, of what the mediums had written "automatically" upon their letter paper or writing pads or notebooks. Putnam, for example, goes to some length in his preface to discount the extent of the editorial changes he made to Stiles' manuscript. This increased the wonder of the book and buttressed the claim that it provided evidence for the intervention of other intelligences in its writing. Stiles' ordinary and "common" education, for example, was also cited—as with Andrew Jackson Davis before him—as additional evidence that he could not have produced what he had written (or, in Davis' case, dictated).

As spiritualist writings were received and published in the later part of the 19th century, it became clear to readers that there were varying degrees of spirit control over the writers. As one might say today, the degree of psychological dissociation present in the mediums varied. Was the writing produced entirely unconsciously, or was it produced in a less fully divided consciousness, one that was merely being inspired by elevated or heavenly thoughts? The answer influenced the degree of authority that a reader might accord to the written product.

This is why the Stiles notebooks have a unique value. They are not only a true curio of extended writing in a strange penmanship, but they provide an opportunity to compare what in fact flowed from the pen of an entranced medium (however one wishes to assess that claim) to what was put before readers as having been automatically written. If there are significant differences here and if they appear to be the result of deliberate, conscious edits, then that affects how one views the

²⁷ This genre was closely akin to another, much more vast, in which spirit mediums spoke or wrote in the voice of Jesus or his earliest disciples, and in which they detailed the errors into which later forms of Christian belief had fallen.

published version, and not just of Stiles' book, but also, implicitly, all the other books published in this genre.

Differences Between the Notebooks and the Published Book

Upon first viewing, the major difference between the notebooks and the published book is the appearance of the two: Specifically, the notebooks' wobbly handwriting was supposed to be evidence that the spirit of John Quincy Adams was the actual author. This feature is obviously not present in the published book, and Putnam was only able to reproduce a few examples of the curious penmanship in which the notebooks were written. The printed version could only offer its readers Putnam's and Brigham's attestations that the handwriting was extraordinary and that it mimicked that of whichever spirit happened to be communicating through Stiles at that point. The handwriting of George Washington, for example, as depicted in the notebooks, mimics that of Washington, whereas that of John Quincy Adams mimics that of Adams. It is not inappropriate to note that people, like Stiles, who have been trained to compose type from various manuscripts are well practiced in studying other people's handwriting peculiarities.

The published version also lacks the drawn illustrations—rather like Shaker “gift” drawings—that appear in one of the notebooks. Instead, the text of the published version has been modified so that the illustrations are described, rather than graphically displayed.

One considerable difference between the notebooks and the printed book, which Putnam does admit was the result of his editing, is the arrangement and order of the material. Most of the material in the first notebook, for example, does not appear in the published version. This is the earliest material, but it consists of personal messages to Brigham that seem to be motivated by a desire of the spirit to convince Brigham that it was truly that of John Quincy Adams. Brigham quotes a few lines of this material in his preface to the published book. There are also asides, from Adams to Brigham, in the latter part of the notebook that seem meant to encourage Brigham's study of the philosophy of spiritualism and his growing conviction of its truth, and to fortify him against skeptics and “persecutors,” as well as answers to probable objections by doubters (presumably, as the word got out in the city about what was going on at the Brigham's house), explaining such sticky issues as why, as a refurbished spirit, he would be expressing himself in the feeble handwriting of his later years, or why he would be manifesting himself to the Brighams or through Stiles, rather than to his own son and surviving family. These

rather brief asides in the notebooks became enlarged and extensively developed in the book version's first sections, in which spirit Adams explains how he came to visit his old haunts and choose Stiles as his medium.

The other material, too, which tells of Adams' various adventures in the afterlife, is arranged differently in the published version than they are in the notebooks. In the notebooks, the material begins simply as a series of a dozen apparently promised "letters" or messages of spirit condolence and conviction. Then, in the midst of letter 9 (a little more than halfway through the first notebook), that format is implicitly abandoned and the spirit of Adams segues into relating his own adventures in the afterlife, his own pilgrim's progress, as it were. The published book, however, is divided into twelve sections which have been imposed on the work by a later hand—either that of Stiles in his revised version, or of Putnam in his edited and re-arranged version. These divisions do not track with any indicators in the notebooks.

The "action," such as it is, occurs almost randomly and almost entirely "offstage," as told by other spirits greeting Adams in the afterlife with stories of their own. Almost all of the notebooks' material actually consists of long greetings, invocations, blessings, addresses, expressions of gratitude, and testimonials, by spirits upon meeting Adams' spirit. These spirits are dressed in heavenly habiliments and display emblems, flowers, banners, and insignias that flash mottos and allegorically illustrate virtues and messages of uplift.

Although "progression" appears to be one of the spirits' highest truths, very little real progression or development, as a modern reader would understand it, occurs in the narrative. The "action" consists of Adams floating about the heavenly spheres on a luminous cloud, or in a celestial barque upon the River of Immortality, accompanied by assorted groups of spirits and angels. They tour and view scenes enacted by spirits in varying states of enlightenment. The spirits re-assess their earthly life and repent of their sins. They undergo postmortem regeneration and advance out of their lower and less liberal earthly views, and embrace a belief in universal salvation, for example, or endorse the virtues of non-violence, or revolutionary emancipation, or any of the other notions of the most advanced New England thinkers of the time.

The effect of this portrayal resembles what one might imagine to be a hyped-up celestial pageant in which groups of costumed participants, representing the virtues, for example, form and re-form into emblematic assemblies, display mottos, banners, flower garlands, and doves, sing songs of joy and praise in iambic pentameter,

proceed across an audience's view in arbored and garlanded floats, offer each other crowns and laurels, and "illustrate" the virtues (development and progression in the afterlife, as pictured here, apparently occurs through a spirit's viewing "scenes" that are "illustrated" to it.) To a modern audience, the closest correspondence might be a halftime show at a football game. An audience from Stiles' time, however, would likely recognize it as a heavenly counterpart to the pageantry incorporated into occasions when notable figures were publicly welcomed and honored, such as the occasion when John Quincy Adams visited Weymouth in 1842.

Perhaps the sole exception to this lack of narrative movement, in distinction from the mere display of tableaux, as it were, is an episode in which the spirits of Benjamin Franklin and his scientific confreres in the afterlife perform an "experiment" in which they beam down their "vitalized" enlightened energies, through a sort of galvanic battery to the lower spheres and into the mind of an array of Native Americans. (In the notebooks, the main "receivers" of this beam of enlightenment in the form of what is referred to as "defecated electricity" are Samoset—who befriended the Pilgrim settlers at Plymouth—and Tecumseh; in the book's version, Tecumseh has disappeared and is replaced by "Brave Heart.")²⁸

By the time the manuscript left Putnam's editorial hand, however, the material had been rearranged into a tighter narrative structure, with somewhat more movement, orchestrated into something approaching a chronological vision, and sealed at the end by a testimonial to the spirit of John Quincy Adams by George Washington, in his handwriting and signed in witness by a bewildering variety of the spirits of famous people from all times and places, each in his or her own handwriting. The effect of this re-arrangement is to align the book more closely with the narrative structure of Universalist minister and writing medium Charles Hammond's 1852 work, *Light from the Spirit World: the pilgrimage of Thomas Paine and others to the seventh sphere in the spirit world*, which had already been published by Bela Marsh and others.

The book also develops at some length a few items that appear only glancingly in the notebooks—for example, a description of a vision introduced to Adams by the spirit of John Hancock (who does not appear in the notebooks at all) in which they tour a "Castle of Brotherly Love" in which Native Americans and African Americans reside together in harmony. The cast of characters among the spirits who appear in the two versions are also somewhat different—the book's version, for example, has

²⁸ The episode is recounted in notebooks 5-6, pages 405-440. The corresponding material is in the book on pages 417-432.

the spirits of Patrick Henry, Joseph Warren, Benedict Arnold, Hannah More, Felicia Hemans, Confucius, and Fenelon interacting to some extent with that of Adams, but they are not mentioned in the notebooks. Conversely, some of the characters in the notebooks are not mentioned in the book.

Finally, besides all the other differences noted, there is evidence that an editor dug right down into the wording of the notebook manuscript, to enhance and embellish its language. That editor was either Stiles, making his revised version, or Putnam, working on the manuscript. A comparison of just one pair corresponding selections from the notebooks and from the book shows this:

Notebook: 2.151

I say, could they but follow me, and behold this humiliating spectacle in your nominally Free, Republican America—O! I feel certain, that they would desire the benign presence of Celestial Powers, would invoke their precious aid, to assist in wiping away this stupendous, God-defying sin, which so foully blots the fair escutcheon of their beloved country, and renders it a “hissing and byword” to all the Nations of the Earth! Could they but view, with the interior sight, the fearful scenes being enacted in the Old Dominion, where the demon of War is desolating, with his blighting influence, many lovely spots of Nature, and carrying nothing but wretchedness and misery to human hearts; where the noble image of God is transformed into a hideous fiend of passion and revenge; could they but behold their brother man mowed down, like grass of the field at the bidding of the arch-demon, O! if their hearts were not steeled against all the nobler impulses of Humanity, they would fervently, ardently pray, that the Angels of Peace and Love might descend to earth, with healing on their wings, and plant once more, in this bequeathed heritage of God to Man, the fragrant olive branch; that the implements of battle might be beaten into implements of industry, and Nations learn war no more.

Book: page 368

I say, could they but follow me, and witness this humiliating spectacle in the nominally free, republican America, O, I feel assured they would desire and even invoke the bright presences of heaven-ascended saints to aid in wiping out the existence of this blot upon her fame, and hindrance to her national prosperity and happiness! Could they but go with me across the “fathomless deep,” and view the fearful tragedy being enacted there, where the demon of war is desolating with his blighting influence the most beautiful works of Nature and

Nature's God, and carrying naught but wretchedness and misery to human hearts; where the image of the Divine is transformed into a hideous fiend of passion and revenge; could they but see their brother-man mowed down like grass of the field at the bidding of this arch-fiend; O, if their hearts were not steeled against every noble impulse of humanity, they would fervently, ardently pray for the Angels of Peace and Love to descend from their heaven of concord to earth, with healing on their wings, and silence the turbulent passions and fierce antagonisms raging in the hearts of their fellow-man.²⁹

The conclusion is that the book, published as something that had been automatically written, was not exactly what came out of Stiles' entranced state, that it was not, as Charles Hammond described his own work, "written wholly by the control of spirits, without any volition or will by the medium, or any thought or care in regard to the matter presented by his hand," but was the product of extensive editing and revision.

The Book Meets with a Mixed Reception

William Lloyd Garrison, reviewing the book in *The Liberator*, wrote:

While, with unfeigned respect and good-will to Mr. Stiles, Mr. Brigham and Mr. Putnam, we feel constrained to pronounce the claim set up for the spiritual origin of this work as preposterous and delusive, we are nevertheless highly gratified with its many excellent and fearless sentiments on the subject of slavery, war, the rights of woman, universal reform, and everlasting progression—sentiments which are dear to us, and we believe 'worthy of all acceptation'—sentiments which are redolent of peace, purity, benevolence, justice, the love of man and the love of God—making the volume, in this respect, worthy of the commendation bestowed upon it by Mr. Putnam.³⁰

The reviewer in the New York-based *The Spiritual Telegraph* was less kind than Garrison:

²⁹ The published version makes clear that the original passage was not read, nor was it meant to be read, as a prediction of the Civil War battles in Virginia, but rather as a description of the "war" currently raging in that slave state and elsewhere in the South that pitted slave-holders against their slaves.

³⁰ "New Publications. Twelve Messages from the Spirit John Quincy Adams..." *The Liberator* (Boston), January 7, 1859.

The manuscript was revised for publication by Allan [sic] Putnam, Esq., a literary man of much taste; but the labors of his pruning and condensing hand have not entirely excluded from the book a certain wordy, windy, wishy-washiness which, it must be confessed, is a common characteristic of works of that class. There is a certain smell of earthiness in these messages—a certain time-and-space externality—which impresses us somewhat unfavorably in respect to their unmixed spiritual origin. That Spirit intelligence and force had an essential concern in their production, we have little doubt, but we can not perceive upon them the definite insignia of either heaven, earth, or hell. We rather regard them as coming from that mid-region of dreams and phantasmagoria which is made up of the exuviae and odds and ends of all celestial, infernal and mundane spheres, agglomerated into mental and visual forms correspondent with the predominant associative spirit-thought and desire, and with the existing mediative susceptibilities. The purported Spirit autographs of which sever *fac similies* are given are certainly curious; but it strikes us that the Spirit of John Quincy Adams, if it was really he, would have manifested a much higher appreciation of the common sense of us mortals if he had concluded his book by a simple recommendation that we should test it by its intrinsic merits, rather than to back it up with the signatures of some five hundred and forty Spirit attestators, several of which are given in such fantastic curlicues as to defy any man on earth to read them, and any or all of which may have easily been counterfeited by one hand. Yet the book will unquestionably afford entertainment to many minds, and it is not for us to say that *some* may not read it with profit.³¹

The Boston spiritualist newspaper, *The Spiritual Age*, also took notice of the book. The reviewer wrote:

In fact, so markedly is the style throughout that of an uncultivated youth, and so different from what we should expect from the “Sage of Quincy,” the “Old Man Eloquent,” that it is difficult to believe he had any hand—or anything more than a hand—in it. If he, or any other of the “radiant immortals” who are introduced, really furnished the essential *ideas* set forth—and this we will not undertake to dispute—yet *in expression* they have surely got so “mixed up and diluted” with the medium, that it is quite impossible to make any distinction. We judge that the book will not improve the general reputation of spiritualistic literature, nor carry conviction to minds skeptical as to spirit-intercourse. Yet its production

³¹ “New Publications. Twelve Messages from the Spirit of John Quincy Adams ...” *Spiritual Telegraph*, April 9, 1859.

under such circumstances presents a weighty problem to the candid student of psychical laws. Whence did it come, if not from the source claimed? Let him answer who can. Possibly the work may serve to call attention to and illustrate the laws, as yet little understood, of the transmission of thought through media.³²

Despite this sort of review, however, some had a high opinion of it. The reviewer in the famously credulous Boston spiritualist newspaper, *The Banner of Light*, for example, wrote:

So striking and eminently readable a book deserves even more attention than we have the room to give in these columns. The intrinsic evidences offered in the pages of the book itself that its contents emanated from the spirit of John Quincy Adams, are, in our sincere judgment, after a careful examination into the same, quite sufficient to give it the character of truthfulness and reliability. ... It cannot be denied that Adams does not at all times, and in all respects, convey the utterance of his own spirit in his own way; or that the matter proceeding from him is more or less mixed with the organization employed in the transmission; yet, with all this, there is amply enough to convince any really candid searcher after truth, that these Messages are essentially and in reality from his own exalted spirit, and that the reading and heeding of them will not fail to result in great good.³³

The book was also favorably received by those who regarded its marked mixture of high and low, heaven and earth—which others saw as problematic—as peculiarly strong evidence that spirits were involved in its production. The well-known apologist for spiritualism William Emmette Coleman, for example, would later write that he saw it as “unique in spiritual literature, and embodies, to my mind, conclusive proofs of the identity of the intelligence producing it, the internal and external evidences both being weighty in that regard.” As external evidence, Coleman cited the peculiar and varied handwriting, which bore “a strong resemblance” to that of the earthly signatures and writing of the signatories. He also found it to be reasonable (unlike the reviewer in *The Spiritual Telegraph*) that

³² “New Publication. Twelve Messages from the Spirit John Quincy Adams...” *The Spiritual Age*, January 22, 1859.

³³ “Book Notices,” *The Banner of Light*, February 5, 1859. The book was also reviewed, with no judgment with regard to its truth, in the Boston-published *Ladies’ Repository*, February 1, 1860.

Adams would have chosen to manifest himself through friends and neighbors in Quincy, rather than through strangers. He continued:

The internal evidence consists of the nature of the contents of the volume. The ideas correspond with those J. Q. Adams would be likely to convey, expressed as they were under difficulties and through another and an inferior mentality. It is a universal law of mediumship that all language of ideas coming from a spirit have to be projected through the mind of the medium, and will be coloured to distorted more or less by the action of that mind. Hence, necessarily, this book is not fully equal to what Mr. Adams would produce at first hand. The wonder is, rather, that he should have succeeded so well; for the language is uniformly good, devoid of obscurity or rhapsody, vagueness or idealism, such as are found in so much of the so-called spiritual literature. The work is plain and practical, full of sturdy common-sense; albeit, it has too much of the devotional element in it to be palatable in all respects to the more radical thinkers of the Spiritual and Free Religious schools; but such, we know, was a marked characteristic of Mr. Adams' long and useful earth-life. ... The soul of John Quincy Adams permeates the entire production,—of course not in the full radiance of the enfranchised and glorified spirit, owing to the imperfection of the channel of expression, but the spirit author has no cause to be ashamed of the sentiments, ideas, and even language therein given to the world in his name. In this respect, it is in marked contrast to most of the so-called messages and communications purporting to emanate from the good and great in the better country, which are usually remarkable only for their lack of coherency of expression and their paucity of ideas. Ofttimes, however, when definite and tangible ideas are embodied therein, they are found to be signally demonstrative of the lack of knowledge of the brain from which they issue, being antagonistic alike to the inductions of established science, the deductions of rational philosophy, and the dictates of enlightened common-sense. Mr. Adams' *Messages* are however of a different character, and, under the circumstances, measurably worthy of their asserted source.³⁴

In just a few years, spiritualists would also point to the book when making the case that the spirits had prophesied the Civil War. They referred to its description of the spirit of Washington issuing a peroration and a warning of impending bloody

³⁴ "Curious Cases Relating to Spirit Identity," *The Spiritualist Newspaper* (London), (September 2, 1881): 111. Originally printed in *The Free Religious Index* (Boston).

disaster for the nation in retribution for its sin of slavery.³⁵ Garrison's *The Liberator*, for example, despite having given the book a less than stellar review upon its publication, reprinted this section of it on January 10, 1862, under the headline, "Another Remarkable Prophecy."³⁶ And Joseph Rodes Buchanan later wrote:

Had the people of this country been sufficiently enlightened to investigate these messages fairly, they would have seen that there was sufficient evidence that this warning really came from Washington, and the pulpit would have enforced its solemn truths. But our destiny was fixed; Washington knew that his voice would not be heeded, and that war could not be prevented.³⁷

Twelve Messages from the Spirit John Quincy Adams was printed and sold by its publisher, Bela Marsh, until the firm dissolved in 1867 after Marsh's death. His widow Mary then sold the copyright of the book to William White and Company,



operating in the offices of (and as part of) the Boston spiritualist newspaper *The Banner of Light*.³⁸ It was there that the plates of the book were destroyed, along with the entire

Banner of Light building, in the Great Fire of Boston in 1872.³⁹ The book was never republished. The Stiles notebooks, however, presumably escaped the fire because the Brigham family retained them in Quincy as their sacred charge.

³⁵ This appears in the published book on pages 316-319. The corresponding passage in the notebooks is spread over notebooks 4, pages 343-344, and 5, pages 345-346 and 358-360.

³⁶ This would later be picked up by spiritualist chronicler Emma Hardinge in her book, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: The Author, 1869), 492.

³⁷ "The Prophetic Faculty: War and Peace," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1.4 (May 1887): 3-5.

³⁸ The copyright assignments of many of Marsh's books to *The Banner of Light* are preserved in the business papers of *The Banner of Light*, now in the Harry Houdini collection at the Library of Congress.

³⁹ L. L. Whitlock, "Mr. Joseph D. Stiles," *Facts* (Boston), July 1886: 191-192, commenting on the book: "This book, which is one of the most important in its class,

The Further Career of Joseph Stiles

As far as Joseph Stiles' later career went, the writing of the John Quincy Adams-spirit material and its publication seems almost incidental, although the renown he received from the book must certainly have given his initial work as a medium a boost. He never published anything else. Perhaps producing such a work was, in retrospect, not worth the effort. And as more works of automatic writing were published, the genre lost its luster and faded away for a long while, and the production of automatic writing mostly confined itself to private, intimate séances whose proceedings, including written messages to the participants, were not directed to a mass audience.⁴⁰

Stiles' later work as a medium was not done under the control, supposedly, of John Quincy Adams. Instead, he became "developed," as it was said, as a peripatetic "platform medium," which is to say, a medium who mounted a stage or podium in front of various audiences, fell into a light trance, and allowed himself to come under the control of a spirit guide. In his case, the guide was the spirit of an American Indian named "Swift Arrow." Stiles, personating "Swift Arrow," would rapidly describe the spirits of many varied deceased, who approached him. They would generally have some connection with members of the audience, and would ask, through Stiles/Swift Arrow, that audience members acknowledge that they recognized them. It is not unfair to notice that, unlike John Quincy Adams, who had left behind him a wealth of detail about his life that might be checked against what his "spirit" said, "Swift Arrow" had no such biographical history that might be used to test him.

Stiles described how he had developed this mediumistic specialty in his 1884 autobiographical piece in *Facts*:

Tipping tables, physical, mental, and other phenomena followed in rapid succession, until it was announced to me that I must go before, and present to, the public the remarkable manifestations which were gaining such a firm foothold in my organization. Anterior, however, to this, while visiting friends in

was very interesting, but is now out of print, the plates being destroyed in the great fire of Boston."

⁴⁰ When he wrote his autobiographical essay in 1884 about how he became a medium, he did not even mention the book.

Quincy, the announcement was made through the mediumship of Miss Sarah A. Southworth, the talented writer for the *Banner of Light*, that an Indian chief, by the name of Swift Arrow, would take me under his guardianship, and control me to present indubitable evidences of the reality of modern spiritualism to public and private audiences. The announcement was treated lightly by me as one of the prophecies “born to die in the bud,”—as one destined to remain unfulfilled during the term of my physical life. But the medium was right and I was wrong. Could I have foreseen what was to come I should have shrunk from the colossal task imposed upon me. In various towns in Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire, before large public audiences that filled the halls provided for me to their utmost capacity, faithfully has he fulfilled his prophecy; and in camp, séance, and convention is he still continuing his work, delighting thousands, leading sceptic and believer to feel that the two worlds are indeed united in such strong bonds that nothing can divorce or break them. Fifteen years or more were required to bring me in subjection to those conditions necessary to a successful manifestation of my test medial powers in public. At a private séance in the town of Danville, Vt., my Indian guide proposed to exercise them in the Union Baptist Church in that place. I at first strenuously remonstrated against such a public exhibition, and he (my Indian control) as strenuously persisted. I acceded to his wishes, with the advice of friends on this side of life, and my first public séance was a success, twenty excellent tests being given, and all recognized. After that I surrendered myself to his control, and notwithstanding the hundreds of séances given in hall, church, convention, and camp, not one has proved a failure. This is a marvel to me. Among the thousands of names and incidents given, I do not believe there have been ten out of the whole number but that have been verified, either at the time they were given or subsequently. This is certainly remarkable. My memory for names is very poor, and it is a wonder to me that Swift Arrow should prove such a success in that direction. These tests are not confined to places where I have lectured, but, in multitudes of instances, from places I have never visited, and never expected to. And yet some one is always present to verify these wonderful evidences. From Europe, South America, and the Western States, their ascended inhabitants have visited my séances, manifesting to some friends present whom they knew, establishing beyond all cavil the identity of their immortal presences.⁴¹

Nevertheless, the style of his mediumship, as evidenced in the notebooks, is really not so different from how he conducted his platform “tests.” In the notebooks,

⁴¹ “Platform Tests at Onset Bay Camp-Meeting, with Autobiographical Sketch of the Medium, Joseph D. Stiles, of Weymouth, Mass.,” *Facts* (Boston), March 1884: 43-49.

the spirit of John Quincy Adams narrates his meeting with spirit after spirit, who come to him to present themselves—very much like spirits coming from hither and yon to show themselves to Swift Arrow—and, indeed, the spirit of John Quincy Adams in the narrative of the notebooks, had sometimes dropped into the present tense, to complete the similarity.

The transition Stiles made from personating the spirits of notable patriots to personating the spirit Swift Arrow occurred gradually. In 1867, for example, he spent several months in Vermont, giving lectures on spiritualism supposedly delivered by the spirits of Hosea Ballou, Theodore Parker, and Union heroes Colonel Elmer Ellsworth and General Nathaniel Lyon.⁴²

Whitlock, the *Facts* editor, attested in another article to Stiles' unusual ability to rapidly call forth a plenitude of spirits, despite Stiles' being, when out of trance, "naturally unassuming and retiring in nature":

We doubt if any other man has been in the field so long as a platform medium, and we have known none who has given so many names of departed friends as he has done. On one occasion, where we were present, he gave names frequently, with some incident proving identity, of *two hundred and sixty-five deceased persons in an hour and ten minutes!* What person among us could speak for and accurately repeat a message from that number of people, in a moving throng of living beings, in so few minutes, and wait for his description to be recognized? Not one, we believe, nor do we think Mr. Stiles himself could do it without the aid of his control, "Swift Arrow," in whom he justly seems to place implicit confidence.⁴³

However "naturally" reticent and retiring Stiles may have been, under the control of "Swift Arrow" he appears to have developed a stage presence that was most unusual in the way he exploited his audience—resembling something like a combination of an auctioneer, a revival preacher moving into the crowd from time to time to ask if he could "get a witness," and a stand-up comedian exciting his audience with off-hand jokes about the failings of staid church members and politicians. One reporter described his coming on stage at a spiritualist camp meeting in 1894 this way:

⁴² "Joseph D. Stiles in Waterford, Vt.," *Banner of Light*, March 9, 1867. See also the enthusiastic testimonial for Stiles in "Joseph D. Stiles in Waterford, Vt.," *Banner of Light*, February 8, 1868.

⁴³ L. L. Whitlock, "Mr. Joseph D. Stiles," *Facts* (Boston), July 1886, 191-192.

The sun was fast rolling down the slope in the west, when Joseph D. Stiles took his seat in a chair at the front of the speaker's stand. Two large pots of flowers were placed, one on each side of his chair.

Mr. Stiles is of medium hight [sic], stout and well rounded out. He usually on such occasions wears a skull cap. His hair is gray, and on the top bristly.

He began at once his communion with the spirits, holding both hands out in front of him, palms up, and gazing up into the shade of the grove while he talked.

There came expressions of profound piety all around, many of the women looking pale and blanched. Some of them gazed at the medium's face with that far-away look, so deftly depicted in the pictures of Joan d'Arc, in the garden.

Mr. Stiles in a good, clear voice, as rapid as an auctioneer, began to announce the ghostly visitors.⁴⁴

Here is a transcription of part of one of his appearances at the spiritualist summer enclave at Onset Bay, Massachusetts in 1884:

The first man that comes to me has papers in his hand, and says they are legal papers as though that was his business. He gives his name as Charles Sayer, son of Benjamin Sayer, and says that he was a recorder of deeds in New Bedford. Now comes another from Warren, who gives his name as Azaria Cushman; and here comes another, who was acquainted with the others, from the same place, and will be known here. He gives his name as John B. Nichols. Here come two more; one of them went away a long time ago, the other afterward, and both give the name of Elija Nickerson. Bro. Wheeler, here comes one whom I think you will know, and he comes from Philadelphia. His name is very curious. His first name is Charles, and the last Sharpless,—Charles Sharpless. Now here comes to the Emerson lady a lady, and she gives me a choking sensation. She gives her name as Esther Ticknor, and as you do not readily recognize it, I will give you another name with it,—Will Ticknor. Now here comes a man seventy-five or eighty years old, who has Esq. to his name; he comes to some one here, gives his name as Horace Gleason, from Malden. Here comes another who, when on the earth, used to preach the gospel, but he says he is advancing in the other world; he says he is beginning to shed his feathers, and is quite well; gives his name as Dea. Sargent. I see another, who went away a long time ago; his name is Nathan Newhall, and Aunt Nancy is with him. Another comes, who says he belonged in Melrose, and was in some way

⁴⁴ J. N. Taylor, "Recognizing Spirits," *Boston Daily Globe*, August 20, 1894.

connected with a railroad; he gives his name as George E. Carr, and that accounts for it, for cars are connected with railroads, aren't they? Here comes a man who was very generous; his name is Jeremiah Martin. A lady comes to some one in this audience, and an old gentleman with her, who went away years ago, and a young man comes, too; the young woman wants to reach her husband, Dr. Josiah---- (the last name lost); she says her name was Lucy Norcross before she was married, and her father's name is Daniel Norcross; well, that is all of that. Now, you know, I want to help the deacons all I can, for I think it is a good idea to have them come back, so I will say that this one comes from Falmouth, and was called Dea. Solomon Lawrence, and old Aunt Polly comes with him; she was his wife, and along with them comes his old-maid sister, and her name was Lucy Lawrence. And now here is another, and I see written out in the air Captain. Now I see Methia Fuller,—yes, and old Joe Fuller. And now I come down into the audience to some friend that seems to me to be here; he is an old brave, and his name is Charles Forest Clifton, from Foxboro, and with him is Lucy and Georgie. And here comes another deacon, and he is a lively one; he comes to shake you up a bit, and he says he has come to let you know that spirits can come back; and he says that they are livelier corpses than some of you here are; he gives his name as Deacon Martin Torrey. Now, I am going a long way from here to Philadelphia; a man comes and brings a small chest, and that means a medicine man, and he gives his name as Dr. William Eddy. And now comes another man, and he comes from New Bedford, and gives his name as Samuel Taylor; he says she went away from home and froze to death. You know "birds of a feather flock together," and I guess that is so, for all these doctors come together, and here is another, Dr. John West.⁴⁵

This sort of rapid-fire patter was typical of his work as a platform medium. A reporter from the *New York Sun* filed a story that described his performance at Boston's Tremont Temple in 1891, which was printed under the headline, "Spooks in Tremont Temple: Nearly 200 Called to Earth on a Double Quick to Give Their Experiences":

Tremont Temple was filled with spooks to-day in answer to the summons of mediums. As they appeared they were recognized by persons in the audience. One after another appeared until the people became half frenzied with excitement. It was so remarkable a manifestation that many who had been inclined to scoff at spiritualism were converted to that belief.

⁴⁵ "Platform Tests at Onset Bay Camp-Meeting, with Autobiographical Sketch of the Medium, Joseph D. Stiles, of Weymouth, Mass.," *Facts* (Boston), March 1884: 43-49.

The occasion was the forty-third anniversary of modern spiritualism. There was a miscellaneous programme. Joseph D. Stiles of Weymouth, a veteran medium, trotted out 129 spirits in 55 minutes, and all but thirteen were recognized. In the afternoon [J.] Frank Baxter produced about forty more to gladden the hearts of their friends. The messages which these spirits brought from spookland were very funny in some instances. Mr. Stiles utilized "Swift Arrow," an Indian spirit, as his "control." Old Deacon Parkhurst's spirit, whose garments "Swift Arrow" said smelled of the sulphurous canopy, was greeted by "I know you" and "Recognized." Blake Windell was not recognized until "Swift Arrow" explained that he used to drink "fire water," twice a year for six months each time. "I know him," said a weak voice in the gallery. Plummer Chesley said this was the first time he had been permitted to come back to mother earth: and all he had to say was that while Congress might close the gates of commerce, it couldn't shut the doors to heaven, and he guessed hell was in the same fix. George Waltham said he died at the hand of a stupid doctor, who made a mistake writing a prescription: "and," he continued, "some people would now give these fellows a monopoly of the thing, and let them keep right on sending good, respectable, hard-working people to their kingdom come."

Dr. Payne of East Preston and Deacon Abner Churchill said they formerly lived in Brunswick, Me. The latter said he didn't know as deacons got along any better in spirit land than other people did. Lewis Bemis said he and his wife were having a great old time among the heavenly throng. As a former resident of Waltham came Henry Whiting, who said he had hoped the audience wouldn't take offence if he swore a little, as in spirit land people lived the same kind of lives they did in the world below, "for," said he, "you know they say an honest damn is better than a hypocrite's amen." The exercises lasted all day, but the spirits didn't put in an appearance in the evening.⁴⁶

Stiles performed as a platform medium, mostly in the Northeast, and particularly in New England, and made his home in Weymouth. He worked his skills at the spiritualist camps at Etna, Maine, Alton Bay, New Hampshire, and Lake Pleasant, Massachusetts. During the 1880s and 1890s, he appears to have attached himself especially to Boston's First Spiritual Temple, and to have become a regular test medium at the spiritualist summer gatherings at Onset Bay, performing alongside notoriously fraudulent "materializing" mediums who displayed spirit-precipitated portraits of the deceased or gauzy apparitions appearing out of dark cabinets at séances.

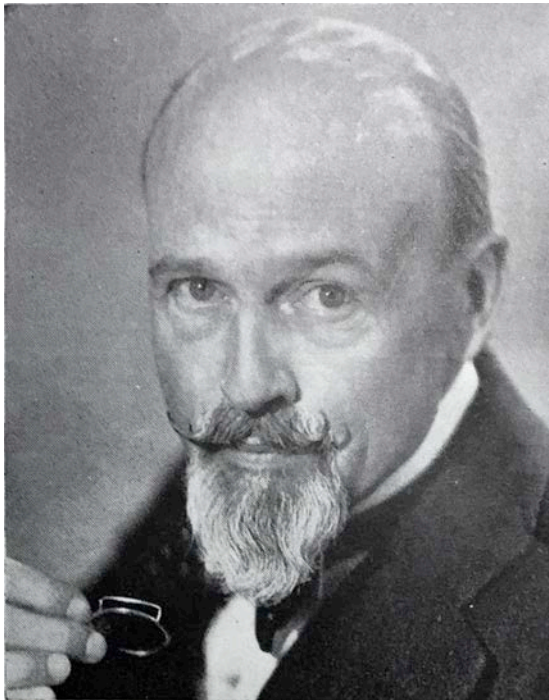
⁴⁶ "Spooks in Tremont Temple: Nearly 200 Called to Earth on a Double Quick to Give Their Experiences," *New York Sun*, April 1, 1891.

He died, of a stroke, at his home in Weymouth on March 31, 1897. His funeral service was conducted there. He was buried at Village Cemetery in Weymouth.

The Notebooks Find Their Way into the Library of Congress

Stiles' original notebooks survived, most likely (at least for a while) in the hands of the Brigham family. The notebooks had no identifying marks on them, indicating their provenance. Brigham himself seems to have regarded himself as merely their spirit-assigned caretaker, rather than the owner.

They surfaced again, almost eighty-five years later, as part of an undetailed bequest to the Library of Congress, made by "Edward Saint, via William W. [sic] Larsen, 1943." They are now kept in a box, along with two other items, in the Library's Manuscript Division.



Edward Saint

The Library also has other material from that bequest from Edward Saint. That material consists of eight large volumes of "scrapbooks of mounted newspaper and magazine clippings, programs, portraits, etc., relating to [Harry] Houdini," and those scrapbooks found their way into the collection of the Library's Rare Book Room, probably in part because they complement the Rare Book Division's Houdini Collection, which it acquired as the result of a bequest, made by Harry Houdini's brother and his widow Beatrice ("Bess") in 1927, after Houdini's death, according to Harry's own previous wish.

That huge 1927 bequest consisted of Houdini's massive collection of books and periodicals and newspapers on magic, the occult, and spiritualism. It also included a number of scrapbooks he made of newspaper and journal articles, as well as some letters (most of his correspondence was made part of another bequest by Bess and his brother to another library). These

scrapbooks were organized thematically. One of them is labeled on its spine “Evan’s [sic] nephew—clippings ...” and is filled with old and new journal and newspaper clippings on the general subject of spiritualism, ghosts’ appearances, old pamphlets detailing the confessions of men about to be hanged, palm reading, astrology, and so on. In the front of that scrapbook of Houdini are letters from “R. Evans,” in which Evans notes that he is forwarding to Houdini such clippings as he may find interesting. These letters from R. Evans, from London, are dated around 1909-1911. The librarian who catalogued this scrapbook of Houdini’s tentatively suggested in the catalog entry that “R. Evans” was “Ralph” Evans, who was likely, opined the cataloguer, a nephew of Houdini’s professional acquaintance, Henry Ridgely Evans, an historian of magic and spiritualism.

But that is incorrect. The R. Evans of the Library of Congress collection clipped British journals and newspapers for items he had reason to believe that Houdini would find interesting, and Houdini pasted them in a scrapbook. There are also about a dozen books among the hundreds in the Houdini collection itself that have “R. Evans” or “R. E.” inscribed in the front of them. The same cataloguer seems to have gone into each one’s catalog description and written “R[alph] Evans” or “R[alph] E[vans].”⁴⁷



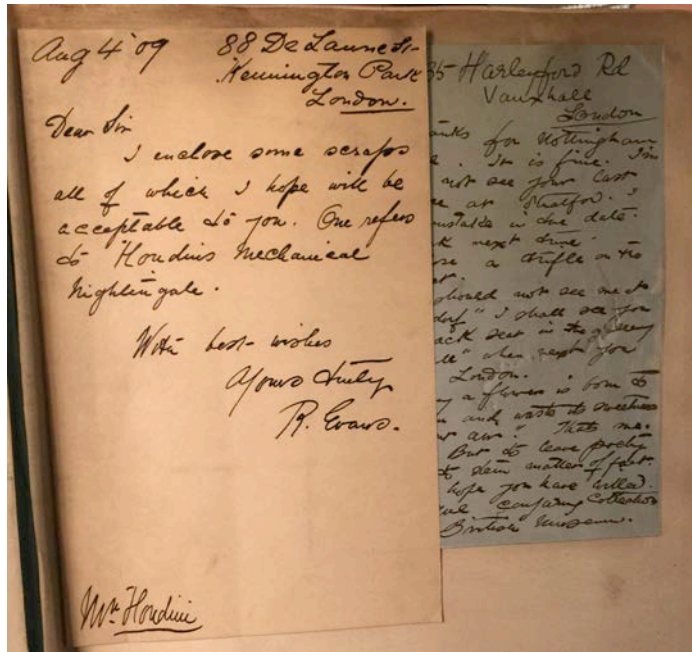
But “R. Evans” was not named Ralph. Nor was he a nephew of Henry Ridgely Evans. He was, instead, Robert Evans, the nephew of retired British conjurer and ventriloquist Henry Evans (1832-1905), whose stage name was Henry Evans Evanion.⁴⁸ Henry Evans, during his long career, had amassed a huge collection of historical ephemera on the subject of magic, the occult, and spiritualism, but he had died nearly impecunious, while living with his wife, and his sister-in-law Ellen, who had been married to his brother Robert, who was also in the theatrical business. Also living with

Harry Evans Evanion at the time of his death was brother Robert’s son, Robert

⁴⁷ Perhaps this incorrect identification—especially connecting R. Evans to Henry Ridgely Evans—was suggested to the Library by William Larsen, who conveyed the Saint bequest.

⁴⁸ The palm for discovering the identity of “R. Evans” goes to Marc Demarest and his research wizardry. Houdini wrote about Henry Evans Evanion in *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* (New York: Publishers Printing Company, 1908), 21-26.

Evans, Jr., who made his living as a silver chaser. Robert, Jr. is registered in the electoral rolls in 1911 at the same address (88 De Laune Street, Kensington Park, London) that “R. Evans” gives as his return address in at least one of the letters pasted into the “Evan’s [sic] Nephew—Clippings ...” scrapbook in the Houdini Collection.



Everything that came from “R. Evans” in the Library of Congress’s collection that relates to Houdini, came from Evanion’s nephew Robert Evans after his uncle’s death. And some of the other material that resides in the Houdini Collection apparently came originally from Henry Evans Evanion, when he earlier sold them to Houdini. Speaking of Houdini’s library collection,

a writer in a 1920 issue of the Masonic journal *The New Age* wrote:

His extremely valuable play bills, programs, and clippings regarding magicians of all nationalities who have appeared in England were purchased by Houdini from Henry Evans Evanion, a conjurer and curio collector of London. Some of this valuable material Evanion inherited from his father and grandfather, who were collectors before him ... Henry Evans Evanion died old and poverty-stricken in London, June 17, 1905. He was a drawing-room entertainer from 1849 to the day of his death. “For fifty years,” says Mr. Houdini, “Evanion spent every spare hour at the British Museum collecting data bearing on his marvelous collection. When he was on his death bed he presented me with a superb scrapbook containing Robert Houdin’s programs, his one legacy, which is now the central jewel in my collection.”⁴⁹

Evanion, in his declining years, sold much from his collection to the British Museum and, in his last year, to Harry Houdini (some items from out of Houdini’s

⁴⁹ Mysticus, “A Corner of the Library: Collectors of Occult and Magical Books,” *New Age Magazine* 28.6 (June 1920): 275-276.

purchases from him eventually found their way into the Messmore Kendall Collection housed at the University of Texas' Harry Ransom Humanities Center in Austin).⁵⁰ Houdini, during the final year of Evanion's life, paid Evanion to work for him as a kind of research assistant, as well, and the evidence of the material in the Houdini Collection at the Library of Congress is evidence that the arrangement was continued after Evanion's death, with his nephew Robert Evans.

Back to the Library's Manuscript collection: The Stiles notebooks are in two boxes catalogued as "R. Evans papers" and summarized simply as "correspondence, notes, and copies of writings pertaining to witchcraft, astrology, spiritualism, etc." That is all the description of the boxes that is available, except that it was acquired through the Edward Saint bequest. The boxes contain four different things:

Note = Debord told his dupes that the spirits had formed a committee of patronage, of which they had nominated King David as patron, and of which Lamartine, Tolstoi, Musset and Gambetta were members. The list of officials of the London Spiritualist Alliance Limited, is headed thus:-
 "W. Stainton Moses and E. Dawson Rogers, Presidents in Spirit Life."

Speaking of Home "that variety artist" Clodd says:- "The one man who said he was an impostor, was no physicist, but the poet who wrote "Mr Sludge, the Medium" - Robert Browning."

"For religion - why, I served it, Sir! I stuck to that! With my phenomena I laid the Alchemist sprawling on his back and propped St Paul up, or, at least, Swedenborg! In fact, it's just the proper way to baffle these troublesome fellows - liars, one and all, are not these sceptics? Well, to baffle them, no use in being squeamish: lie yourself!"

"Mr Sludge, the Medium":

I will make a note of criminal prosecutions of Spiritualists.

Yours Truly,
 R. Evans

The first is a batch of letters to Houdini from "R. Evans" in London, in which he explains that he is forwarding clippings. The clippings themselves are also included. They are precisely the sort of clippings that are in the Houdini scrapbook in the Rare Book Room. And the signature of this "R. Evans" matches that of the "R. Evans" in the letters at the front of the Houdini scrapbook. The letters in the Manuscript collection boxes, however, are from the early 1920s, a little later than those pasted in the Houdini scrapbook in the Rare Book Room. These therefore appear to be clippings that Houdini had not yet

pasted in his "Evans" scrapbook by the time he died in 1926. One can speculate that because these letters and clippings were the only thing in this boxed batch from the Saint bequest that were obviously identifiable by name (Evans' signed letters), that the entire batch was cataloged as "R. Evans papers." It is not surprising that this

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Harland, "The Evanion Collection," *British Library Journal* 13.1 (Spring 1987): 67-68.

loose batch of clippings just escaped being included in the 1927 Houdini bequest to the Library of Congress.



The second item in the boxes is a group of four small copybooks, filled out in the handwriting of R. Evans, in which he has copied down items from books and newspapers on the subjects of spiritualism, magic, and the occult that he believed that Houdini would find interesting.

The third item in the boxes is a loose-leaf alphabetized book, which appears to have been Houdini's homemade telegraphic codebook, which he used to communicate with his wife Bess when he was traveling. It assigns single words, probably from a small pocket dictionary, to longer instructions, such as "forward \$2,500 to the account," "Shall you do this or shall I?" or "The item is in Bessie's Blue Room" or the addresses of

various professional magicians and perhaps booking agents or equipment fabricators, or Houdini's other contacts around the world. It is also not surprising that this book—because it had information about persons still living and perhaps also because Bess was still making use of it after Houdini died in sorting through her husband's telegraphic correspondence—escaped being included in the 1927 bequest.

The fourth item in the boxes consists of the six Stiles notebooks. These, as already noted, had no labels or markings on them to explain what they were, so perhaps Bess Houdini held them back from the bequest in the hope of identifying them. Or perhaps they just turned up later, an item that Harry had bought but had not yet received by the time he died, after the bequest had been made.

It is almost certain, therefore, that the Stiles notebooks were historical curios that Harry Houdini acquired as part of his collecting activity, just possibly from either Henry Evans Evanion or his nephew Robert Evans, but perhaps not from them at all. Other similar things that he collected as they were made available to him included, for example, a batch of the business papers of *The Banner of Light* newspaper, and various manuscripts of crystal-gazer Frederick Hockley (1808-

1885), both of which are in the Houdini Collection in the Rare Books Division as part of the Houdini bequest.



The Stiles notebooks, therefore, remained with Bess Houdini after he died and, along with the other items in the “R. Evans papers” boxes, were not conveyed to the Library of Congress in the 1927 bequest. Instead, they were conveyed there in a bequest by Edward Saint to the Library in 1943. How did that happen?

Harry died in 1926, and Bess met Edward Saint early in the 1930s. “Dr.” Edward Saint was born Charles David Myers in 1890, but made his career as a carnival worker, magician, and séance conductor under the name he adopted. He was a devotee of Houdini and amassed scrapbooks full of newspaper clippings about Houdini and playbills from Houdini’s life. In his admiration for Harry, he was like Bess. She and Saint quickly grew closer, and she came to rely on him for emotional support and other things: He was the organizer, for example, of the annual “Houdini séances” after Harry’s death, in which attempts were made to have Harry’s spirit contact Bess and to identify himself to her by means of a particular message that he and she had agreed upon before he died. These continued until 1936, when Bess apparently put an end to them.

Bess Houdini and Edward Saint were more than close. They were living together in 1942, when Ed Saint died on October 22. Saint had also been a good friend of the editor of *Genii* magazine, William W. Larsen, and often appeared in the pages of *Genii*, either as the subject or the author of articles.

Larsen gave a talk at Ed Saint’s funeral. As part of that talk he said:

Edward Saint has willed his vast collection of Houdini data to the Library of Congress. This material, carefully assembled in huge scrapbooks, covers everything that has been said or written about Houdini since his death in 1926. Also, there is a vast amount of printed matter about Houdini’s career, both as showman and in private life. Certainly, Edward Saint brought together one of

the most valuable magical compilations, gargantuan in size, that exists anywhere.⁵¹



As noted in the Library of Congress' cataloguing information about the "R. Evans papers" in the Manuscript Division, material in Saint's bequest was conveyed to the Library by William Larsen. The scrapbooks that Saint had made found a home in the Rare Book Collection, alongside the original Houdini Collection materials. But Larsen also conveyed, along with the scrapbooks, the material that had originally been Houdini's, but that had remained in Bess Houdini's possession. The simplest explanation for how this material became part of the "Edward Saint bequest" is perhaps that when Larsen went to Bess' house, where Saint had been living, in

order to collect the scrapbooks for the Library of Congress, Bess just added the material that would become the "R. Evans papers" to the pile—everything, after all, was going to the Library of Congress, where she had previously sent the rest of Harry's collection. Either that or—since Bess died very soon after Saint (she died on February 11, 1943), and since the Saint bequest was recorded by the Library as being made in April 1943, it was perhaps Larsen himself who included Houdini's items in the Saint bequest, as he was collecting Saint's Houdini "memorabilia" from Bess' house just after her death.

—John Benedict Buescher
May 11, 2015

Many thanks to Marc Demarest and Pat Deveney for their sage and indispensable advice and help as I turned up these notebooks during a chance reconnaissance of the Library of Congress' holdings and was working to identify what they were and where they came from. Brandon Hodge provided help in identifying the other Houdini material in the R. Evans papers. I also thank Jeffrey Flannery of the Manuscript

⁵¹ Bill Larsen, "In Memoriam: Edward Saint, 1890-1942," *Genii* 7.3 (November 1942): 85. Saint wrote a regular column in *Genii* for several years, entitled "Thru the Monacle." He also went by the names of "Professor Sesrad" and "Sir Edward St. Radem."

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